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A BASIC PRINCIPLE FOR THEOLOGY

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There have been times in the history of architecture when style was inevitable. In the classic period of Greece or in the Gothic period of northern Europe no architect raised the question as to the style in which he should construct a building. That was decreed for him. And we shall perhaps not go astray if we suggest that the inevitableness of that decree was determined by two factors. One was the purpose to be served by the building, the other was the control over the materials. The one factor determined the contents, the other the form in which those contents were to be expressed. The contents depended on the social and spiritual ideals of the time. The form depended on the nature of the building material and on the mechanical ability to use it.

Now in the great building periods mentioned, both these elements, contents and form, were comparatively simple. Both the Greek and the mediaeval mind had something definite to express. And the form of expression was dictated by the building material and by the knowledge of mechanics. And even in the marvellous product of Gothic art, the principle of construction and support in all its variety was simplicity itself.

At present no such state of things prevails. An architect for a cathedral, a bank, a State capitol, looks about for a style. There is nothing inevitable. And the reason is not far to seek. Both in contents and in form, variety and complexity rule in the place of simplicity. The modern world has grown with a rapidity that staggers us. It is infinitely complex. Whether in social life or in spiritual aspiration there is no clear norm. And with the progress of science a whole new set of materials has come to hand. New methods of building, new forms of construction, have arisen. There are no limits to the possibilities of mechanical control. And the result is that we are in an age which at present has not given itself architectural expression. The Parthenon and the

cathedral of Amiens owe their greatness to their inevitableness. Who shall find inevitableness in architecture today?

Nevertheless the problem is pressing, and is no doubt being solved. Some day the modern world will find itself, both in contents and in form. Some day the architect will arise who will express the twentieth, or it may be the twenty-first, century as logically as the cathedral of Amiens expresses the thirteenth, or the Parthenon the age of Pericles. There are already signs of such a consistent modern architecture. But the problem waits for anything like a full solution.

The above is an allegory. *De theologia fabula*. I speak concerning theology. The system of theology is today in much the same condition as architecture. It is not inevitable. There is no controlling principle. There have been times when Systematic Divinity had the stamp of inevitableness. We need only suggest Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. In all three the conditions were present out of which the body of doctrine reared itself in self-consistent form. But that situation exists no longer. Neither in the contents nor in the form of present-day theology is there given the simplicity that can inevitably express itself in a system of Christian doctrine. In contents the moral and spiritual world is many-sided and complex. Social problems have become vastly enriched in content. There is a deeper demand for the rights of the individual. Democracy is coming into its own. The moral outlook includes the whole race, giving a much greater sweep in extent to the moral problem. All this moral material demands theological expression. Into our theology there must be carried the full demands of moral and personal life. The contents for a theology are indefinitely complex.

Again, as to a formal principle of theology, the difficulty is as great. The authority of infallible Scripture has given way before criticism. The infallible Church has yielded to the belief in development. Moreover, there is the whole new world of modern science, to which theology must be brought into relation. The supplanting of Ptolemy by Copernicus was the beginning of a radical change in the concept of the universe, a change to which theology is still being called on to adjust itself. And this great new universe is ruled by Law, unvarying, absolute, and including

in its sway both man and the farthest realm of the distant stars. It is not surprising that, with such changes both in contents and in form, theology like architecture waits in vain for a systematic expression that shall be inevitable.

Some of the theological results of this situation are easily seen. There is but little interest in a system of theology. There is indeed interest in theological questions, an interest that is widespread, if not always deep. But it is piecemeal. It must needs be so. For example it is noticeable that while a large part of present theology is concerned with apologetic problems, yet there is little systematic "Apologetics" that is worthy of the name. The world has moved so fast that the systematic apologete is left behind. He may indulge in guerilla warfare, but he knows not how to marshal an army. So it is with theology itself. We have an enormous amount of theological material. Biblical criticism, the history of dogma, the social and psychological nature of religion, all these arouse interest, and good results are being achieved. Yet when the attempt is made to put this material into a distinct systematic form, we feel at once a lack of the clearness and definiteness and convincing character that attend the allied work of the critic, the historian, or the psychologist.

Doubtless it is for this reason that ever since Schleiermacher almost the dominant question in theology has been that of method. Men are afraid to theologize until they are sure they know the proper way to do it. I need only mention the names of Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Ritschl to suggest the manifold attitudes towards the question of method. And in the attempt to find a method that shall benefit by all these attempts, one is reminded of the German school-boy, who, when his teacher after a prolonged mathematical explanation turned to him with the question, "Is it now clear?" answered, "Es ist noch nicht ganz dunkel," "It is not yet entirely obscure."

Yet such a condition cannot be permanent if theology is to hold its own. Indeed it cannot be permanent if Christian belief is to hold its own. For the world is a unity, and we must needs think it as a unity. The sense of law dominates our thinking. No department of thought or life can maintain itself in isolation. Christian belief demands the assent of the intellect as well as of

the will. And a mere congeries of theological data will not satisfy the intellectual demand. There must be a systematic theology if Christian thinking is to command the allegiance of intellectual men.

Doubtless the accomplishment of such a task is far off. But the first step to it is the winning of a basic principle. If theology is to express itself in systematic form there must be some legitimate starting-point for its construction. What is the proper starting-point for a system of theology today?

I mean by such a principle a truth or idea that lies within the contents of Christian faith or Christian experience. Out of the discussion as to proper methods, this much seems clear, that the approach to Christian doctrine cannot be by a principle that itself lies outside the realm of Christian faith. The contents of the system of belief are not to be intellectually demonstrated by a process of speculation. The fall of systems constructed on that basis is sufficient warning not to renew the attempt. Of course I do not mean that Christian belief is to refuse intellectual test, or to fail to bring itself into relation with the general contents of man's intellectual life today. To do so would be to turn one's back on the intellectual life altogether. But what I do mean is that any such vindication must start from within the field of Christian experience and not outside. This demand is simply in the line of all scientific procedure. The science of geology does not rest on a speculative theory derived from *a priori* reasoning. That was the method of mediaevalism. The modern science of geology begins with knowledge of the earth derived through observation, experience. On the basis of that experience the science of geology is formed and is brought into relation with other fields of experience, thus forming a part of the whole body of scientific truth. The systematic study of Christian doctrine must use the same method. It must begin within the field of Christian experience, and must systematize that experience. Then and not till then can it bring that field into relation with other experience, and thus give a sound vindication of Christian truth. The basic principle which we seek must then be a Christian concept, one that shall be fertile; that is, one that stands in essential relation to the body of Christian

truth. What part of Christian doctrine can best serve as such a basic principle?

I suggest two requirements for such a principle. In the first place it must be true; that is, it must form an integral part of Christian belief. It must not be extraneous or forced. It must be an essential element of the Christian faith. Indeed this requirement is perhaps the only one that is absolutely imperative. For various starting-points are possible, and from any concept which is an integral part of Christian truth the whole truth might conceivably be developed. It was said that Agassiz from one bone could reconstruct the entire fish; it mattered not what bone it was. Thus the primary and only absolutely imperative requirement for a basic principle is that it should be true.

Yet another requirement is practically necessary. In order that the construction should be effective it must be based on a principle that is in close accord with present methods of thought. It must be in the terms of the present day. While it is conceivable that a logical system should be built upon nearly any principle that is itself true, yet it will lack strategic value for the task of theology unless that principle be truly contemporaneous. We may call this second requirement adaptability.

I need only mention in passing several principles that have been or may be suggested. The doctrine of the fatherhood of God has been emphasized in such a way as almost to reconstruct our present theology. In England through Robertson and Maurice and in America through Bushnell and Phillips Brooks it was almost a new gospel in its contrast to Calvinism. Nevertheless we can hardly find in it our needed principle. In itself the doctrine is liable to be ambiguous. Much depends upon the concept of fatherhood. And the modern thought of parentage with its tendency to weak indulgence and good-natured indifference is too often put in place of the New Testament thought of the Father, which includes the concept of authority and power as well as the moral element of creative love. Perhaps it is on account of this possible degeneration that there are signs that the preaching of the divine fatherhood is beginning to lose power. There is a demand for the sterner elements of righteousness and law. And while these elements are strictly included in the Chris-

tian doctrine of fatherhood, yet they are not strategically arrived at in the best way on the basis of that concept.

The same may be said of the doctrine of divine love. With all the completeness that may and should be given to the doctrine, it yet tends to degenerate, in popular use, into undue softness. Love that is self-consistent must itself have the elements of righteousness and law, but these elements will not be well guaranteed by the popular idea as to what love is.

I have from time to time been much attracted to the doctrine of creation as the starting-point. There is much to be said for it. Historically it carries us deep into the Old Testament, and to the radical distinction between the religion of Israel and that of the pagan world in general. It serves as a basis for a true concept of the transcendence and the immanence of God. In the New Testament the belief in God as Father finds its roots in the Old Testament belief in the creator, a belief now carried into the moral sphere. Thus God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Creator God of Hebrew prophecy completely moralized. Christ himself is the expression of that moral creatorship as the founder of the kingdom of God. The doctrines of atonement, and of justification, lend themselves readily to treatment as vitally related to the belief in the creative love. And the very beginnings of the development of Christian dogma after New Testament times are closely connected with the relation between such a belief in creation, and the Greek concept of the relation between God and the world. For many reasons, genetically and logically, the concept of creation commends itself as the basic principle of Christian theology.

Nevertheless this principle hardly meets the strategic requirement. The word "creation" carries with it today a heavy load. We may clearly recognize that evolution is not identical with an unconscious emanation, but may and indeed must be treated as the expression of the divine will. Nevertheless the concept of evolution is so all-dominating that even the appearance of opposition to it must be avoided at any cost. The relation to evolution of the creative concept of God can best be arrived at as a result. To make it the starting-point requires too much explanation. And although that explanation may be very clear and

simple to the theologian, yet theology must today come from the closet into the street. It must not handicap itself with a concept that to the ordinary modern man seems at any rate uninteresting and of little importance, even if not contradictory to his scientific thought. With reluctance then the concept of creation must be abandoned as the basic principle for a theology today. It lacks the second requirement, adaptability.

What does this test of adaptability demand? I suggest two elements of our thought today, both of which are demanded by this requirement. The first is the overwhelming importance put on the social problem. This is perhaps the dominant interest of our time. It is so many-sided that to describe it is to describe the modern world. From the period of Kant's *Critique* and from the French Revolution the social question has pressed ever more to the front. The outburst of philanthropy, the overthrow of the slave trade, the destruction of slavery, above all, the growth of democracy, these were characteristic of the nineteenth century. And throughout that movement a deepened sense of the value of the individual and a stronger emphasis on the organic forms of social life went hand in hand. As the undermost man demands to be recognized at his full worth, so also is a social fabric demanded in which righteousness shall rule. The State as the guardian of justice is more and more looked on as the final guarantee of the rights of the individual. Our interests then are dominantly ethical. They are concerned with the upbuilding of a society in which righteousness is the law, and in which the individual can enter fully into his heritage.

And a second characteristic of our thought today is what the Germans call *Wirklichkeitssinn*, a sense of reality. All truth must be brought to the hard test of fact. Men are not interested in speculation or fancies. Truth is to be got not through metaphysical speculation but through the experience that comes from actual contact with reality. Science finds its teacher in the given world which it is to explore. The scientific imagination differs widely from speculative metaphysics. The latter finds its truth within itself by the test of self-consistency. The former finds its truth in its relation to fact and in its ability to interpret that fact. Induction has set aside speculation. Neither religion nor

theology nor philosophy will interest the man of today unless it has vital relation to the world of fact.

We can then lay down the following criteria for the basic principle that we seek. First, it must be true; it must be a genuine, constituent, integral part of Christian belief. Secondly, it must be adaptable; it must be in touch with the conditions of life today. And this requirement itself has two sides; the principle must be primarily social, ethical, rather than metaphysical, and it must meet the test of reality, it must be in immediate contact with the facts of life.

In suggesting the Christian doctrine of the kingdom of God as a basic principle for theology calculated to meet these requirements, of course I make no new suggestion. The fundamental importance of the kingdom of God as a Christian concept is widely recognized, and ever since Ritschl there has been a tendency to make it the leading principle in theology. Yet its importance is far from being fully perceived, and its value as a constructive principle of theology is certainly not fully appreciated. And we are far from having a system of theology worked out with any inevitableness from this concept. It seems therefore in place to direct attention to it as a concept of which much more use will be made in the future than has been made in the past.

First of all, this concept meets the test of being an integral part of Christian belief. Genetically it is the starting-point of our Lord's preaching. And it forms the immediate connection of his teaching with its Old Testament foundation. In both Old and New Testament it is vitally connected with the Christ. Moreover, and here we come to the most important point, the further consideration of this concept as an integral part of Christian faith immediately brings us to our second requirement, that of the adaptability of our basal principle to present problems. Those present problems we saw to be primarily social, ethical. And the kingdom of God is essentially a condition of society ruled by the divine will, and therefore revealing and manifesting the divine character. In that kingdom is therefore revealed both the nature of God as its ruler, and also the nature of men as members of a society founded on the divine Name. The kingdom of God as an ethical society is at once the heart of Christian

belief, and also the means of bringing that Christian belief into vital relation with our social problems.

I am aware that here I touch a question that is now the subject of heated discussion. It is maintained by some that the kingdom of God in the New Testament is not ethical but eschatological, that the concept is not that of a society manifesting the divine will in righteousness, but is a condition of things to be brought about by a purely divine, supernatural act. Man cannot hasten it by his action. All that he can do is to fit himself and others for entrance into it when it comes. In reference to this contention I can make here only two suggestions. In the first place it is impossible to overestimate the social emphasis of the teaching of Christ and of the New Testament in general. The relation to the neighbor, the manifestation of the divine spirit of forgiveness and love to him, is set on an equal basis with the relation to God. Indeed it is just in and through the one that the other is expressed. Whoever minimizes the ethical element in the fundamental teaching of Jesus leaves out its essential contents.

But it is contended that this ethical teaching does not set forth the ethics of the kingdom but only a condition for entrance to the kingdom. It is an *Interimsethik*, an ethic for the short time before the coming of the supernatural event. It is a condition, like that of repentance, required for acceptance when the kingdom comes. But this leads us to the second suggestion. It is inconceivable that to the mind of Jesus the morality demanded as a preparation for the kingdom should be different from the law of the kingdom itself. Jesus knows no arbitrary rewards and punishments. The judgment will come in exact relation to the inner life of the man to be judged and in relation to his conduct to his neighbor. Therefore it follows necessarily that the ethics taught by Jesus are essentially the ethical laws of the kingdom of God. And this is all we need for the contention that, whatever the original use of the phrase "kingdom of God," "kingdom of heaven," the laws of that kingdom are at the heart of true human society. I need hardly add to this the evidence of St. Paul, to whom, with all his eschatology, the life of justification cannot be separated from present membership in the body of Christ, nor that of St. John, who says in most unequivocal

cal language that if a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar. Throughout the New Testament the relation of a man to God is expressed in and mediated by his relation to his fellows. And that is the essential principle of the kingdom of God.

The concept of the kingdom of God as the expression of a true moral society commends itself then in its adaptability to the present social problems. And it commends itself no less in its relation to the sense of reality, the demand for facts, that is characteristic of our time. For a theology built on this concept as a basic principle stands firmly on the earth. It claims that the revelation of God is to be found in and through the principles that rule society. We need not say, "Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down:) or, Who shall descend into the abyss? (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead.)" The word is nigh, for the word of faith is the principle of society itself. He who will find God must perforce find him through the social life of man. To the question of Nathanael, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? we answer, Come and see. We do not ask the modern man to go out of the city in which he dwells. Rather we try to show him that in order to understand that city he must seek its Maker and Builder in God.

The concept of the kingdom of God meets our requirements for a basal principle in that it is true, an integral part of the Christian faith, and in that it is adaptable to present needs; it rests on the ethical foundation and it appeals for verification to the facts of life.

There remains to suggest by way of example the application of this basal principle to some definite theological problems. And first let us point out the double-sidedness of the concept. The kingdom of God is on one side the gift of God. Therein is the eschatological element and its permanent value. It is on the other side the moral task of men, to be brought about in the conduct of human life. That is its ethical contents. But these two are the same. For us the coming of Christ to usher in the kingdom cannot be separated from the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of man. The kingdom of God is the unity of religion and morality. It is the religious principle itself, revealed

in the life of man as the constituent force of human society. Religion and morality have always been closely connected. The individualistic view of religion misses its historical essence. From its earliest beginnings religion has been a social fact, entering as a building-force into the social fabric. Yet the union of religion and morality has never been complete or free from aberrations except in Christianity. If one were forced to give an abstract definition of the Christian religion apart from its historic contents, he would not go far astray to say that it is the absolute union of religion and morality. The relation to God and the relation to the neighbor meet together. God is to be found not in abstraction from the world but in immediate contact with human life. The Christ has authority to execute the divine judgment because he is the Son of Man. And "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me." There is no other test.

I propose therefore the following thesis. No doctrine about God belongs to Christian theology unless it is capable of application to and expression in the life of man. Every truth about God is also a truth for human society. Every theological doctrine is capable of being translated into life. That is the difference between theology and metaphysics. Metaphysics may conceivably hold theories about God that have no bearing on human life. I say "conceivably," for in these days of Pragmatism such theories have even in metaphysics a somewhat doubtful validity. Whatever we may think of Pragmatism, Christian theology at any rate is pragmatic in essence; that is, its truth about God can be expressed in society, and indeed is drawn from society. God is known in and through the kingdom of God. To stand apart from that kingdom is *ipso facto* to stand apart from the Christian knowledge of God. Theology and ethics meet hand in hand. Theology is essentially ethical, for all truth about God must be revealed in and through society alone. The laws of human life are the laws of God its creator and source.

Let us glance very briefly at the application of this thought to the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Atonement. The doctrine of the Incarnation starts from the

truth that God has revealed himself in Jesus as the founder of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a moral society. But as a moral society it is founded by the divine will. And therefore its founder in history must be looked at under a double aspect, as divine and human. As the revealer and founder of the kingdom of God he is divine. For that revelation and founding is a divine act, a divine act accomplished in him. He is God manifested to men. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." But also he is himself the full expression of that kingdom. He perfectly lives its life and manifests its laws. Therefore he is the Son of Man, the full expression of true humanity. The belief in the Incarnation is the belief that God is to be known in and through his society on earth established in Jesus Christ.

Take the doctrine of the Trinity. A sharp distinction is often drawn between the economical and the ontological Trinity, the Trinity of revelation and the Trinity of being. The former is concerned with belief in the divine Fatherhood revealed in Christ and communicated by the Spirit. The latter is the attempt to apply these elements of Christian experience to the life and being of God himself. Now I submit that the distinction has been overdrawn, and that the concept of the kingdom of God suggests the means by which it can be bridged. If the ontological Trinity means the attempt to interpret God in terms that are out of all relation to humanity, then it is not a part of Christian theology. It is at best a piece of philosophical metaphysics. But that is not to say that the Trinity of revelation cannot be truly ontological, that it is not concerned with the actual being of God. For the Trinity of revelation rests on the witness to God given through human society. God is the creative will, energizing in Jesus and giving himself in the society of men bound together by his Spirit. Through these social experiences we know God, for therein is the will of God revealed. But to know the divine will is to know the divine being, for will and being can be separated only by a false abstraction, an abstraction utterly impossible so long as we are dealing with ethical terms. The doctrine of the Trinity is the interpretation of God in the social, the ethical, terms that belong to human life. It is the interpretation of the King by means of his kingdom. If there be

the experience of trinitarian elements in the kingdom of God, we must ascribe these elements to him who is its King. The law of the kingdom is the law of its Master.

One other suggestion must suffice, the application to the doctrine of the Atonement. The Atonement is the expression of divine forgiveness through suffering. As such it becomes the law of the kingdom of God. The atoning work of Christ is carried on by his Spirit in the Church. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." The law of vicarious suffering, of forgiving love, is the law of the society founded on the divine Name. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." To be forgiven is to be a member of that society whose law is the law of forgiveness. To be forgiven is to have the law of forgiveness in our hearts. He who ceases to be a forgiving member of the kingdom ceases to have the forgiveness of God.

These are but suggestions. They are not intended to be of value in themselves. They are intended to suggest some of the applications of the concept of the kingdom of God as a basic principle for Christian theology.